50 CONCEPTS FOR A CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY

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33 Model Minority

Emily S. Lee

Since its creation by William Petersen in 1966, the model minority theory has been contested by almost the entire discipline of Asian American studies. As David H. Kim explains, "What makes the model minority myth a serious problem is that it continues to racialize Asians and as [Gary] Okihiro has pointed out, does so in a way that strategically keeps in play a host of negative perceptions."[1] Obviously the notion of a model minority has been much discussed and much debated. But in philosophy, specifically philosophy of race, political philosophy, and phenomenology, the notion of a model minority has not received much attention. This entry explores the topic through a phenomenological lens. In other words, it does not reconstruct the discussion about the concept's status as a theory or a myth but describes the experience of living in a world with this meaning structure.

Karen Hossfeld describes model minority theory as the belief that "lifestyle patterns and cultural values of some racial minority group (Asian) are more conducive to successful integration into the mainstream U.S. economy than those of other groups (African Americans and Latinos)."[2] Hossfeld challenges the accuracy of the theory; she points out that the group of Asian Americans that Petersen depicts as model minorities immigrated after the 1940s. The model minority did not form and does not describe the first wave of Asian immigrants into the United States. This is because the first wave of Asian immigrants were manual laborers. The Asian immigrants of the 1940–60s were professionals. The United States needed skilled labor during this period, and so admitted people from Asia with skilled labor. The success of the children of this immigrant population cannot be conceptualized as the success of the children of manual laborers economically climbing into the middle class; instead they were the children of middle-class professionals maintaining their parents' class status. Considering the inaccuracy of the model minority theory, what could be the reason for forwarding such a myth? Kim suggests "the Model Minority Myth is too inaccurate to be a truth and too harmful to be an error; rather, it is a tool of social stratification or political domination. In fact, it may be one of the greatest of the most recent inventions of White supremacy as a political system."[3]

One of the primary reasons for Kim's position that the model minority myth functions as a "tool of social stratification or political domination" is because the most dangerous consequence of the model minority myth is that it promotes *intraminority* conflict. Asian American scholars explain that belief in the myth promotes the idea that no institutional barriers exist to prevent economic advancement within the United States. Accepting this idea positions the minority populations who experience difficulty advancing economically as solely culpable for their "failure." Ultimately, the model minority myth pits Asian Americans against African Americans and Latin Americans. I think this remains the greatest danger of the myth and has been much discussed. But this essay expands upon the experience of being-in-the-world with this meaning structure.[4]

Confessions of Being a Model Minority

I want to follow Hossfeld and Kim here in regard to the model minority myth, but I have to come out as a model minority, even as I do not believe in this stereotype or find the stereotype at all helpful in my life as an Asian American. I make this confession confident that my individual instantiation does not universalize the model minority myth as true about all Asian Americans. I make this confession in acknowledgment of the importance of phenomenological descriptions and the genre of autobiography. Autobiography functions as an important method through which the lives of minorities gain visibility, and such visibility is necessary to change dominant images of subjectivity. I choose to include my autobiographical confessions to illustrate the ambiguity of living with this meaning structure. Hopefully my autobiographical confessions do not simply draw attention to my personal self but turn attention to the social structural situation in which Asian Americans grapple with this stereotype.

My immigration was conditioned upon an aunt who married a white male, a member of the U.S. military occupying South Korea.[5] My aunt sponsored the immigration of her brother, my father. My family lost pretty much everything during the Japanese occupation of Korea and the subsequent Korean War. In other words, my parents are not educated, middle-class professionals. I became starkly aware of this when signing some papers to receive my doctoral degree. The graduate school asked about my parents' educational level, and it was in filling out this form that I fully understood the different levels of education between me and my parents.

I am left occupying an uncomfortable schism, explaining that the model minority myth does not describe the majority of the Asian American population, and still confessing that I fit the description. But this is the force of stereotypes—to hold a meaning structure in the world against which one's experiences must be interpreted.

A Tool of Social Stratification or Political Domination

Let me turn to Kim's conjecture of how the myth serves as a tool of social stratification or political domination. Proponents of the model minority myth (both white and people of color) quickly point out that this is a positive stereotype. As a positive stereotype,

many do not understand why the stereotype faces so much contestation from the Asian American community. The present research on stereotype stigma, especially in regard to race and gender stereotypes, demonstrates that when an individual hears a disabling statistic about her group identity, she internalizes the stereotype, ultimately impacting her performance.[6] Specifically, Glen C. Loury, an economist, argues that the existence of a racial stigma forecloses "productivity enhancing behaviors."[7] Following Loury's analysis of stigma, because the model minority stereotype is positive, hearing this stereotype could encourage "productivity enhancing behaviors," facilitating the educational achievements and economic mobility of Asian Americans. The existence of this "positive" stereotype as a meaning structure within the horizon of the world should enable Asian Americans. In other words, this stereotype should reassure me, as an Asian American, that I will inevitably rise in economic class, assimilate into the majority culture of the United States, and ultimately flourish.

To better understand the impact of the stereotype, let me introduce Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work for recognizing that embodiment conditions the subject's relation with the world. He argues that each of us has a corporeal schema that consists of "dynamic motor equivalents that belong to the realm of habit rather than conscious choice."[8] Frantz Fanon critically adopts and transforms Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the corporeal schema with reference to what Fanon calls the historico-racial schema. The historico-racial schema describes black people's embodiment grappling with the overdeterminations of all the stereotypes about their history, race, and body.[9] If other racialized populations develop a historico-racial schema, how does the model minority stereotype impact the embodiment of Asian Americans? As a positive stereotype, does it enable confidence in one's movements and actions? Does it provide certainty that the values exhibited in one's embodiment ultimately assure class mobility?

The model minority myth alone does not encircle the embodiment of Asian Americans. Asian American studies scholars point to the feminization of depictions of Asian American male embodiment. For men, associations of femininity counter career success, while Asian American females walk the fine line between the invisibility of docility and the characterization of being tiger-like at any sign of aggressivity. I find this line especially difficult to walk because any expression of authority is perceived as aggressive. Let me also add that the visibility of Asian American body features especially keeps prominent the status of foreigner, even if Asian Americans have resided in the United States since before 1900. Although there are third- and even fourth-generation Asian Americans, the population group never quite achieves being regarded as simply American. Specific to such foreignness, Asian American embodiment is associated with the comic.[10] Hence for Asian Americans, the stereotype of the model minority—even if taken to be purely positive—does not necessarily set the parameters for an uncontested positive historico-racial schema. The embodiment of Asian Americans is quite ambiguous because of the interaction with several other meaning structures. Moreover, the visibility of Asian American embodiment ensures the unavoidability of these meaning structures on an everyday basis.

Phenomenologically, I confess that the stereotype did not serve as a source of personal assurance. I read sociological studies in which some Asian American students described experiencing this stereotype as a source of self-confidence, but I experienced

the stereotype as a burden, a source of anxiety and stress. I was astutely aware that not all Asian Americans succeeded; after all, I was growing up in the Bronx among other Asian American families barely making ends meet as small store owners. I came of age surrounded by evidence that not all Asian Americans climbed the economic ladder.

Homi Bhabha defines stereotypes as a method that the colonizers use to identify the colonized. Upon identifying the colonized, the stereotype functions to freeze the colonized, the other, as different, but yet entirely knowable. Bhabha's analysis of mimicry applied to the model minority myth suggests that naming this so-called feature of Asian Americans—that Asian Americans assimilate well because they share in the cultural values of white Americans—identifies Asian Americans as a hybridity. As a hybrid culture, Asian Americans are the same but not the same, and so still different from white Americans. The anxiety of the colonizers to remain in control through assumptions of knowledge is ever present in the need to reiterate and to keep the stereotype alive and persistent. Much as I appreciate Bhabha's analysis of stereotypes and mimicry, the model minority stereotype does not function only in this way, because all Asian Americans do not automatically and immediately comply with this stereotype.

Unique to this stereotype, the model minority myth predicts a possibility in the future. Therefore, it is not experienced as true in all periods of time; it is not frozen. And it is not inevitable; some do not achieve this status. So instead of being frozen, like most stereotypes, the myth functions similarly to the anxiety that John Zuern describes in "The Future of the Phallus." Zuern states that the embodied experience of possessing a phallus entails anxiety because of the expectations of the future from boys in becoming men. He explains the experience of the future "as a kind of strain on the body: the internal sense of forward orientation and anticipation in the face of . . . the 'horizon of expectations,' where the future is felt in the present as an anticipation that 'directs itself to the not-yet, to the nonexperienced, to that which is to be revealed. Hope and fear, wishes and desires, cares and rational analysis, receptive display and curiosity: all enter into experience and constitute it.'"[11] Because of the interpenetration of our bodies and the world, boys may experience the expectations of their future manhood as crippling. Within the horizon of a patriarchal society, men occupy positions with the privileges of normalization. But with the expectation of taking up certain futures comes the anxiety of not taking up these futures.[12] The emphasis of the model minority myth on the future, with its dialectical structure of expectations and anxiety of not taking up such futures, functions similarly to the embodied expectations of boys into manhood. In other words, the model minority myth can serve as a source of anxiety for Asian Americans. What if I am the Asian American who is not a model minority, the failed Asian American?

The Centrality of Class in Assimilation

Perhaps most central to the looming anxiety of failure inherent in the model minority myth is class. I write elsewhere about the function of class in capitalist societies; I speculate that one may experience class as burdensome because of the emphasis on choice in the occupation of one's class level.[13] Because capitalism describes class as a matter of choice, as a direct result of effort and intelligence with just a droplet of luck, one

is applauded or blamed for the class level one occupies. Under such circumstances, although the model minority myth emphasizes similarity in culture that facilitates assimilation, it centers on the achievement of class mobility. In other words, the effectiveness of the model minority myth relies upon the perpetuation of a capitalist narrative.

I wonder if the existence of the model minority stereotype contributes to the need for Asian Americans to desire wealth over other values in the twenty-first century. For without exhibitions of economic stability, Asian Americans falter as model minorities. Even without settling the question of whether Asian Americans internalize the stereotype, with the stereotype functioning as a meaning structure in the world, struggling with economic stability may be especially difficult to endure because of the existence of the stereotype. The stereotype promotes the perception that Asian Americans possess every opportunity for economic mobility, for success.[14] Under such circumstances, if one fails, it especially demonstrates one's economic, and therefore social, ineptness.

At the other extreme, Asian Americans who feel comfortably representative as model minorities, the assimilation practices necessary for class mobility may explain the mimicry of white behaviors. Kim writes, "The combination . . . of civic exclusion and racism, on the one hand, and the model minority myth, on the other hand, has led sociologist Mia Tuan to describe Asian Americans as trapped by the double bind of being an 'honorary White' and a 'forever foreigner.'"[15] Within this double bind, the honorary white status counters the foreign status. Assimilating through mimicry of white mannerisms offers the possibility of ceasing to be perceived as a foreigner and instead gaining acceptance and invisibility as the norm. But the visibility of Asian American embodiment ensures the constant play of the two identities of whiteness and foreigner.

I have yet to determine what the loyalties should be for hyphenated identities (not hyphenated in this book). If I am American, then the non-Asian practices in my household do not indicate some sort of "selling out" to whiteness. But if I am Asian, then such non-American practices portray signs of maintaining loose ties to some version of a traditional culture. This dualism suffers from clearly delineating Asian and non-Asian practices and casting such practices as static. Kim explains that there are degrees of assimilation.[16] Even if I follow Kim's possibility of hybrid assimilation, because we live in a society that normalizes the American practices, because we live in a state that incentivizes the American practices through promises of class mobility, I am concerned that in conceding to follow these practices, I am succumbing to the forces of normalization and capitalism. The only alternative I can foresee requires a reconceptualization of American practices. Being Asian American demands changes in understandings of American and Asian practices. In this sense, the hyphenation "Asian-American" does not depict the building of bridges but posits creating a new center. I hold onto the possibility of hybrid culturalism without desiring the invisibility of whiteness associated with the economic success of the model minority myth.

Notes

1. David Haekwon Kim, "What Is Asian American Philosophy?," in *Philosophy in Multiple Voices*, ed. George Yancy (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 241.

2. Karen Hossfeld, "Hiring Immigrant Women, Silicon Valley's 'Simple Formula,'" in *Women of Color in U.S. Society* ed. Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 70.

3. David Haekwon Kim, "Shame and Self-Revision in Asian American Assimilation," in *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment and Race*, ed. Emily S. Lee (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2014), 110.

4. See Emily S. Lee, "The Ambiguous Practices of the Inauthentic Asian American Woman," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 146–63.

5. Elaine H. Kim's autobiographical note expresses her pride in descending from a long line of "bad women." She points out that the women who risk everything to immigrate must have been escaping from their past. See "Appendix A," in *East to America: Korean American Life Stories*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Eui-Young Yu (New York: Norton, 1996), 353–58. I am proud to list my aunt Leigh Parker in this long list of brave women who ultimately sponsored my immigration.

6. According to Sabrina Zirkel, "many studies have now documented the ways that stereotype threat can impair performances." She noted that in 1986, R.A. Gougis "found that African-American participants' performance faltered on a cognitive task when negative stereotypes about African-Americans were primed. Similarly, [C.M.] Steele and others have undertaken a series of studies that demonstrate decreased levels of performance when participants are asked to perform a task that measure[s] some aspect of a negative stereotype about themselves, as when African-Americans are asked to perform a task that will measure 'intellectual abilities.'" Sabrina Zirkel, "Ongoing Issues of Racial and Ethnic Stigma in Education 50 Years after Brown v. Board," *Urban Review* 37, no. 2 (June 2005): 110.

7. Glen C. Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 27.

8. Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 32.

9. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 111.

10. In the movie *500 Days of Summer*, the mere presence of an Asian American family served as comic relief.

11. John Zuern, "The Future of the Phallus: Time, Mastery, and the Male Body," in *Revealing Male Bodies*, ed. Nancy Tuana et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 61.

12. Zuern, "The Future of the Phallus," 66.

13. See Emily S. Lee, "A Problem with Conceptually Paralleling Race and Class: Regarding the Question of Choice," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 39, no. 2 (2017): 349–68.

14. I wonder if the model minority stereotype exacerbated the number of suicides of Korean Americans during the great recession.

15. Kim, "Shame and Self-Revision in Asian American Assimilation," 111.

16. Kim, "Shame and Self-Revision in Asian American Assimilation," 104–5.